

Rufous Fishing Owl *Scotopelia ussheri* camera-trapped at midday near Tiwai Island, Sierra Leone

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Une Chouette-pêcheuse rousse *Scotopelia ussheri* photographiée à midi par un piège photographique près de l'île de Tiwai, Sierra Leone. Une Chouette-pêcheuse rousse *Scotopelia ussheri* a été photographiée à midi par un piège photographique à infrarouges près de l'île de Tiwai, Sierra Leone, le 16 juin 2009. Ceci est apparemment la première fois que cette espèce a été photographiée dans la nature. Curieusement, l'oiseau semblait être actif pendant la journée.

As part of a study on Pygmy Hippopotamus *Choeropsis liberiensis*, near-infrared digital camera-traps were placed on and around Tiwai Island, Sierra Leone (07°33'N 11°19'W), between November 2008 and June 2009. Cameras were set to take a single photograph followed by another automatically after ten seconds; the cameras could then not be triggered for a further 60 seconds. Cameras were moved to different locations after each two-week sampling period. On 7 June, two cameras were placed on Tagati Island, a small island of <1 km², west of Tiwai.

On 16 June, four photographs of an owl were taken by a camera facing a seasonal inlet on the west side of Tagati. The first two (one of which is reproduced here: Fig. 1) show the owl on the ground near the inlet, facing away from the camera at 11.53 hrs. In the third photograph the owl is landing on a Raffia Palm *Raphia vinifera* at 12.02 hrs (Fig. 2). In the last picture, the facial disk is partially visible (Fig. 3). Although the owl

remained in the field of view of the camera for c.10 minutes, it may not have moved enough to trigger the camera until it flew off.

The orange-rufous plumage and the plain upperparts identify it as a Rufous Fishing Owl *Scotopelia ussheri*; the only confusion species, Pel's Fishing Owl *S. peli*, has barred upperparts (Borrow & Demey 2001). Both species are known to occur at Tiwai Island (R. Demey *in Bull. ABC* 15: 275 and *in litt.* 2009). To our knowledge Rufous Fishing Owl has never before been photographed in the wild. The ecology and biology of this Upper Guinea forest endemic are largely unknown. Although most owl species are nocturnal or crepuscular, some are also diurnal (Marks *et al.* 1999). The three species of African fishing owls *Scotopelia*, however, are all considered to normally hunt at night (König & Weick 2008), although Pel's Fishing Owl is reported to be occasionally active in daylight when stressed by food scarcity due to rivers drying up (Kemp 1988). It is



Figures 1–2. Rufous Fishing Owl *Scotopelia ussheri* on the ground beside a small inlet (1) and perching on a Raffia Palm *Raphia vinifera* (2), on Tagati Island, Sierra Leone, 16 June 2009 (camera-trap photos)

Chouette-pêcheuse rousse *Scotopelia ussheri* par terre à côté d'une petite crique (1) et perchée sur un palmier raffia *Raphia vinifera* (2), île de Tagati, Sierra Leone, 16 juin 2009 (photos prises par un piège photographique à infrarouges)



Figure 3. Rufous Fishing Owl *Scotopelia ussheri*, Tagati Island, Sierra Leone, 16 June 2009; part of the facial disk is visible (camera-trap photo)

Chouette-pêcheuse rousse *Scotopelia ussheri*, île de Tagati, Sierra Leone, 16 juin 2009 ; une partie du disque facial est visible (photo prise par un piège photographique à infrarouges)

therefore noteworthy that the Rufous Fishing Owl was photographed during the day and appeared to be active. Whether this is normal behaviour is unknown.

Rufous Fishing Owl is restricted to the forest zone from Sierra Leone to south-west Ghana and is considered Endangered, with an estimated population of <2,500 individuals (BirdLife International 2009). Tiwai Island, a Wildlife Sanctuary with a research station, might represent a convenient base to study this threatened species' ecology, if it proves to occur there regularly. New data could be used to support sustainable land management and conservation plans for the area.

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